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SHOSHONI HOMELANDS AND TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

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Idaho's Northern Shoshoni people form part of a far larger tribal group that occupied a vast western area when eighteenth-century European explorers from Spanish, French, and British outposts encountered them. They had emerged from an older cultural tradition and--like other mountain and plains peoples--employed a variety of economic pursuits depending on their location, but they developed a common language and political organization that distinguished them from their neighbors. Spaniards who met them in New Mexico after 1598 referred to them as Comanche (a term they acquired from Ute sources), while French and British explorers designated them as Shoshoni (a name of unknown derivation); but Comanche and Shoshoni are variant names for a single Indian people. Eighteenth-century plains Comanche and Shoshoni had only one language, but subsequently developed slightly different dialects in scattered parts of their domain. Idaho's Shoshoni people are part of a long, gradual cultural transition that produced nineteenth-century Shoshoni groups extending as far away as Texas and southern California.

Languages serve an essential function in identifying tribal peoples over a reasonably long period of time. Languages evolve gradually enough that their similarities can help identify the close proximity of two groups as long ago as 800 years. Within some such limit, linguistic evidence of long-term contact between neighboring Shoshoni and Nez Perce peoples indicates that both have occupied central Idaho for many centuries. Along with their compatriots in similar regions of Wyoming and Nevada, Idaho's mountain Shoshoni maintained a cultural continuity that goes back at least some thousands of years in their domain. In doing so, they participated in creating more recent Shoshoni culture during its long period of development. Remaining in their mountain homeland after other Shoshoni bands had been driven off to reservations, they preferred their ancient heritage to newer tribal economic pursuits.

When, through their New Mexico branch, Shoshoni-Comanche travelers obtained horses from Spanish colonies, they brought a new way of life to many of their Idaho people. Boise Shoshoni hunters, for example, moved over thousands of miles. Some of Idaho's mountain Shoshoni (later referred to as a Lemhi band) retained their old base but hunted buffalo farther away in Montana's plains. Farther west, some other mountain Shoshoni became a horse-owning band of Weiser Indians. Most nineteenth-century western Wyoming and upper Snake plains Shoshoni joined together in a composite Shoshoni band of mounted buffalo hunters; but more than a few Bruneau Shoshoni horse owners followed the same pattern as the mountain Shoshoni, operating in their own valley rather than following Boise Shoshoni leaders in another large composite band on long buffalo hunts.

Although their location, because it was remote from New Mexico, delayed the transition of Idaho's Shoshoni from dog transportation to pack horses, it gave them other distinctive cultural opportunities. Idaho's Shoshoni bands profited from having fishing resources on the Snake River west of Kanaka Rapids and Salmon Falls adequate to meet many of their needs. During salmon runs, they entertained a number of different tribes that brought a variety of cultural elements to their land. Their contact with plateau groups, and their ability to adopt plateau housing and other practices, strongly influenced development of modern Shoshoni life. The fact that Idaho's Shoshoni bands could incorporate features of both plateau and basin cultures into their way of life was advantageous to them.

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